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BRYN MAWR

## A CHARACTERISATION



Reprinted from the Bryn Mawr Alumnae Quarterly,  
January, 1908



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BRYN MAWR

A CHARACTERISATION

BY

HELEN THOMAS FLEXNER  
A.B., BRYN MAWR COLLEGE, 1893

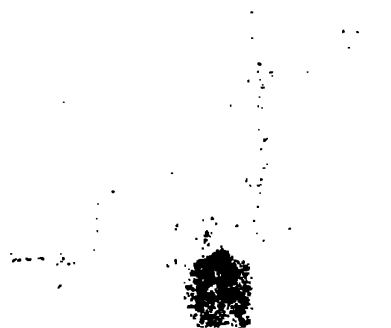
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NOVEMBER, 1905









*"Rockefeller's Ornamental Gate."*

## BRYN MAWR: A CHARACTERISATION.

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In the autumn of 1886, James Russell Lowell in his benevolent and charming old age travelled south from New England to give the encouragement of his presence and the inspiration of his advice to the students and faculty and trustees of Bryn Mawr College, then about to enter on the first year of its existence. He found the teaching staff and the students of the new institution a mere handful of people, sixty in all, for whom the three buildings then standing afforded ample accommodation. Mr. Henry James, in Bryn Mawr twenty years later on the same kindly errand, was met by a very different state of things. The long line of young women in caps and gowns, stretching far over the lawn as it waited for him to appear before proceeding to the assembly hall, represented only a fraction of the students and alumnæ of the college, grown to the number of 1875, while the members of the teaching staff in their gorgeous robes crowded the library reading-room inside of Taylor Hall. Even with the freshmen and sophomores excluded, there was still too little space in the assembly hall for visitors, since the seven great buildings which have been added to the original three contain no auditorium, but have been put up to supply more pressing needs of the community. The growth of the college in two decades, it will thus be seen, has been rapid, surprisingly rapid, when it is remembered that every year a large number of candidates for admission are found by the entrance examinations to fall short of the standard of excellence required, and are therefore excluded. From the first the college has valued the quality of its students and alumnæ far more than their numbers, and has bent all its efforts to making the education given






Denbigh Hall.  
West from the Campus.

Wm. H. B. Baily

them as good as possible and the influences surrounding them as harmonious. It was no doubt this spirit, already embodied in the courses of study announced before a single lecture had been delivered or student admitted, that interested Lowell in Bryn Mawr, and has since brought to address her students a long line of distinguished men.

In the very beginning Bryn Mawr was favoured by its situation, for it stands on the top and extends down the sides of a fair green hill conspicuous for its beauty among the many charming hills that form the environs of Philadelphia to the westward. The country is a fertile farming country, with many brooks running through it, with many little valleys where the snow lingers unmelted in the spring time, and many rising knolls from which to get a pleasant outlook over meadows and woods. The original farm houses have now in many instances been replaced by big stone mansions, and the simple country folk by denizens of the city who have turned the country side into a park, planting hedges of scarlet-flowering *pyrus japonica*, setting out fragrant magnolia trees and gorgeous rhododendrons and training the festooning honeysuckle over many a trellis. However, in certain corners well known to the youthful pedestrian, the farmer is still to be seen driving his plough with its patient, slow-moving horses; cattle graze in the deep grass; and sheep nibble all day long under gnarled apple boughs. By good fortune one of the farms still remaining lies on the hill directly opposite the college, and a student of Wordsworth, let us say, can find easy justification during the pauses of a recitation or lecture for watching out of Taylor Hall windows the upturning of the earth in March. To many young women who have been born and bred in cities and kept in them until June by the necessity for attending school, their first spring at Bryn Mawr has proved an experience of much delight. To watch for the first time the tops of great forest trees grow green, to listen to the earliest, sweetest notes of the wood thrush, to read a romantic tale of Chaucer, the poet of spring, in a field studded over with daisies,—these are indeed occupations never to be forgotten; and if by them a taste for the simple delights of the country has been cultivated, who can say they have not a serious value?

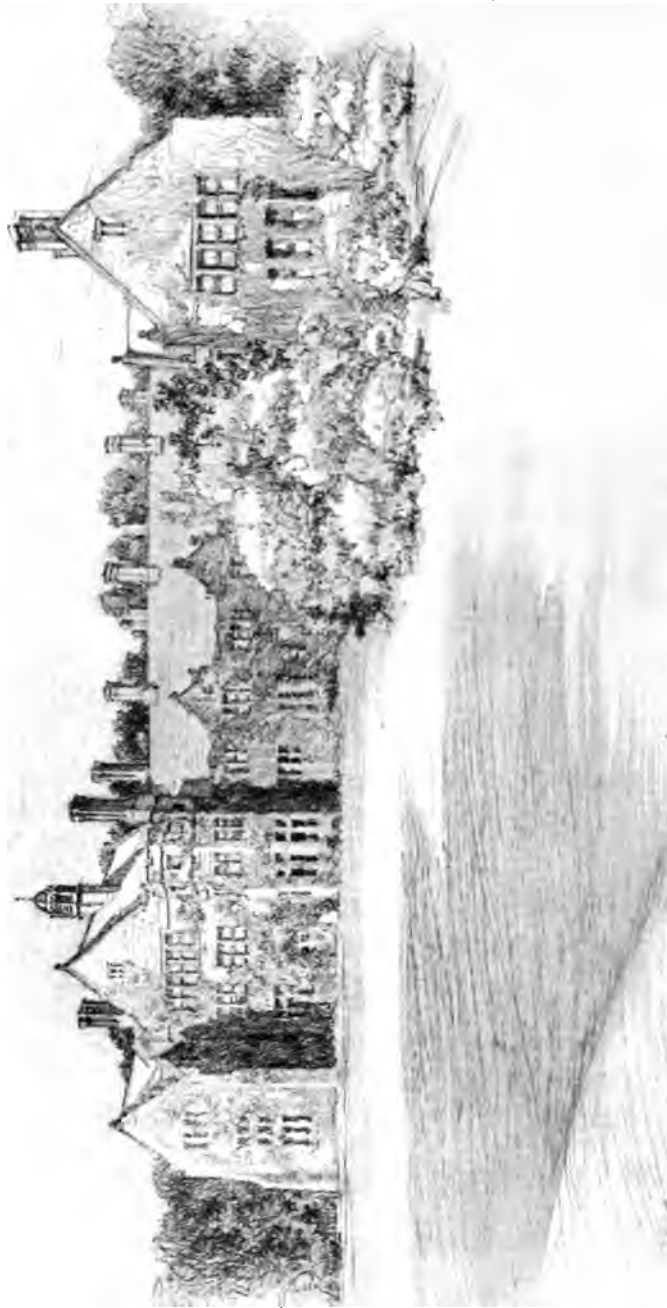


...a few days later a  
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.. The beauty of Design is long lived..

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Denbigh Hall.  
West front from the Campus.

Wm. Wm. P. S. S. S.





Moreover, those in authority at Bryn Mawr have not been slow to recognise the educational power of harmonious colour and line. They have constructed a series of grey stone buildings in the late English Renaissance style of architecture, consecrated long ago to education by the college halls of Oxford and Cambridge, and by care in their planning and placing have succeeded in producing an effect of true architectural beauty which has had, it may not be amiss to note, an immediate influence on the architecture of other American colleges. The boxlike simplicity of Dalton Hall, put up with sole reference to the convenience of its laboratories and the economy of its construction, the mere serviceableness of Taylor and Merion Halls are very little conspicuous, though still to be regretted. The beauty of Denbigh's long lines, Pembroke's stately towers and chimneys, Rockefeller's ornamental gate, and above all the stately grace of the unfinished library building, is what strikes the eye. The space enclosed on three sides by these buildings, to which access is gained by the archways that pierce their towers, is a green lawn planted with old apple trees, and gnarled chestnuts and maples that turn golden in the autumn, and with flowering shrubs of all kinds, while to the westward a view of undulating meadows fills up the picture. Here a crowd of young women, ever increasing and ever renewing itself, pass the busy hours of their student lives, and the images that meet them here are interwoven with their aspirations and thoughts, adding to them the element of beauty that has always so enchanted the human spirit.

It is not strange, then, that they should come to love with an almost pious devotion the grey stone walls that shelter them. They are familiar not only with every detail of the buildings now standing, but know also just what the plans for future buildings are, and share with the president of the college and the trustees the anxiety that each addition may be beautiful in itself and harmonious with the others, completing worthily their quadrangles. The fountain that is to stand in the centre of the arched cloister flanking the library, around which they will pace in thoughtful meditation or wander, it may be, idly arm in arm on a warm afternoon, has been the subject of discussion at many an informal gathering of students. With the instinctive rightmindedness of

generous youth they understand that the beauty of their surroundings is a matter of vital importance in their development, and that any disfigurement of them would make the memories being stored up for the future by just so much the less precious. The following anecdote will serve to show to what lengths their interest will carry them. The question of just the curve to be taken by the stone walk leading from Taylor Hall across the lawn to the Owl gate of Rockefeller was to be decided last winter. After much consultation together they petitioned Miss Thomas, the president, asking that it might run in a certain direction skirting, but by no means disturbing, a group of favorite Japanese cherry trees whose shower of pink blossoms looks so particularly pleasing in the spring time against the grey stone. And Miss Thomas was in her turn greatly displeased with the students for supposing that such a sacrifice could ever have been contemplated.

The college community is democratic and self-assertive, it will be seen. It does not hesitate to express its opinion even on subjects that might be considered beyond its sphere. For it is used to governing itself, making its own rules of conduct, and imposing without fear or favour on delinquent members its own penalties for misbehaviour through its association for self-government. And the salutary discipline of thus being responsible for themselves to themselves is found more than to compensate for any undue sense of self-importance and self-confidence fostered in the students by such a system.

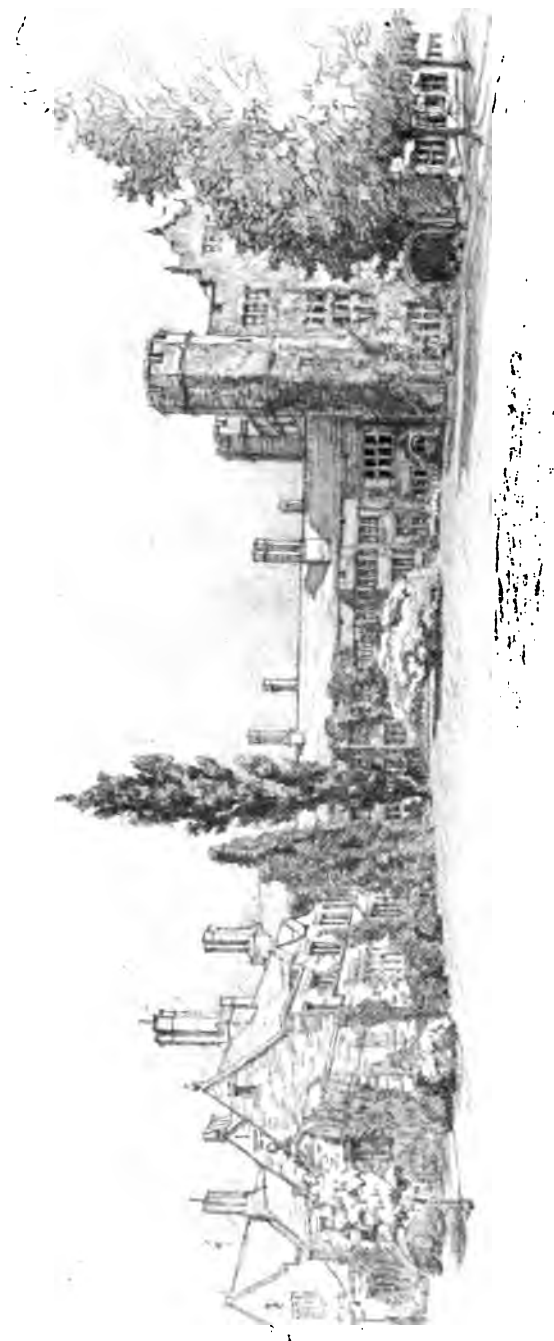
But though it is democratic, the community is by no means indiscriminating. There are in it, at its head, three hierarchies founded on three forms of personal excellence. A girl of unusually strong character and principles is sure to be elected to the Executive Board of the Self-Government Association or to be made a proctor with authority to keep order in her hall, and thus to exert a wide moral influence among her fellows. She is apt to take her duties very seriously, and has been known sometimes to feel that her after life can contain no problems more difficult to settle than some of the questions of discipline brought before her and her colleagues. The clever students in their turn form an aristocracy of intellect, setting fashions in books and ideas, and it is amusing to observe how quickly under their guidance fashions

prevail and how suddenly they change. One year the decorations will be pre-Raphaelite. On the walls of nearly every study will be seen the pure profiles and long lines of Burne-Jones's figures, and the swelling throats and wonderful hair of Rosetti's women; while the next year Mona Lisa's mysterious personality will somehow have taken possession of the common imagination and her face will look down on many a merry party, assorting oddly with it and with the crimson Harvard flag displayed on the opposite wall. Emerson and Carlyle will be displaced from the position of honour on the bookcase shelves by Cardinal Newman and Jeremy Taylor; Thackeray will put Hawthorne to rout, and *vice versa*. The third hierarchy is athletic. The student good at basketball, hockey and other sports is at Bryn Mawr, as at other colleges, something of an idol. It is a pretty sight to see these healthy young women playing together in the sunshine, running after their ball and tossing it down the green field with a wide sweep of vigorous young arms, and it is small wonder that the whole college applauds. A senior class has been known to regard the loss of a college basketball championship as a calamity of almost national importance, and the personal supremacy of the class captains is naturally great.

As yet, however, there is no trace of an aristocracy of wealth or of social position at Bryn Mawr. It has happened in more than one case that a student who brought her maid with her to college found no use for her there, sent her home in six months' time, and lived the remaining three years and a half of her college course in great contentment unattended. And if a girl with very little command of money does tutoring in addition to her work it is not that she may indulge in amusements or fine clothes after her necessary expenses are paid, but that she may buy books or have attractive pictures to hang on the walls of her study. A display of elaborate frocks is considered in the worst possible taste, and when it happens, as it sometimes has happened, that a young woman who seeks distinction by such means finds her way to Bryn Mawr, she rarely stays for more than a year in an atmosphere so unsympathetic. Moreover, the individual who attempts to discriminate in the choice of her friends along lines of external worldly importance is at once sent to Coventry as a snob, and life made anything but pleasant for her until she evinces a change of heart.

It is interesting to fancy the effect of entering such a community on the average girl of seventeen or eighteen. Occasionally, no doubt, the discipline of standing entirely on her own merits is as severe as it is salutary. She must undergo a painful struggle before she finds her level, and is able to accept the frank impartiality of fellow-students and professors as just rather than cruel. Her susceptibilities are often more keenly developed than those of a boy, than her brother's let us say, since from the time she was an engaging little girl with golden hair and a pink sash she has been more petted and indulged than he and more closely guarded from impersonal outside influences. In some way, no doubt, she manages to feel that she is asserting her feminine charm when, for instance, she tells her professor of philosophy that she "never had any logical power." The quick answer, "Say rather, Miss X—, that you never had a mind," gives her a not altogether agreeable shock. But even should her capabilities doom her finally to insignificance, if she be healthy minded, she will still after the first shock is over be quite free from jealousy of the more favoured. Indeed a long observation of girls at college has taught me to know that, in contradiction to the popular superstition in regard to feminine envy, they are most generous in the praise of each other. They take a sincere delight in each other's good looks and also in each other's cleverness.

And it is entirely natural that this should be the case. Each individual is unceasingly busy. At twenty minutes to nine o'clock in the morning the big bell in Taylor Hall tower warns her that it is time for chapel. She snatches up her black mortarboard, pulls her gown over her shoulders and hurries out across the windy, sunlit campus, the empty green spaces of which have at the sound of the bell become suddenly astir with bright-haired figures, whose voices make a chatter like the chatter of birds. After the religious exercises with which the day begins are over, her time until luncheon is filled with recitations and lectures, interspersed with an hour or two perhaps for study in the library or her own room. She cannot afford to idle at this time and only the most beautiful day will beguile her into taking a walk or playing tennis, though if she is athletic she may have got up early to practise before chapel tossing the ball into the basket. In the



From Lane Bridge

Pembroke Gateway and Pembroke Hall East.  
North Front from the Campus.



autumn or spring time she will, however, often bring her books out into the open air and sit absorbed like a girlish Buddha at the foot of a tree, unconscious of fellow Buddhas under trees all about her. Occasionally, no doubt, she will be diverted from her studies by an unusually exciting canvass for officers of the Self-Government Association, or by a vital difference of opinion on some question of morals or politics with one of her friends. Then she will wander out deep in conversation down the hill into the meadows back of Low Buildings, where the stream "Meander," beautiful at all seasons, winds under willow trees, and where the hourly sound of the bell swinging down to her will warn her of the passage of time; but this will not often happen. Visitors to Bryn Mawr, younger sisters and friends, have been known to complain that the college is a dreary place in the morning, when the brief intervals of bustle between the changing of the classes are succeeded by long periods of deep silence, and the slow moving shadows of the buildings and trees clearly outlined on the grass are the only things one can find to watch from the window of a deserted room. The afternoon, though no less busy, is more diversified. While many students are occupied in Dalton Hall doing laboratory work until four o'clock, others may be seen starting off immediately after lunch for a drive, or with a merry clatter of horses' hoofs for a gallop over the hills, or in short skirts for a long tramp before the daylight fails. All the tennis courts are occupied in the afternoon; the basket-ball and hockey fields are never empty, and the gymnasium and swimming pool present a lively scene. Between two o'clock and seven the day's exercise must be taken and some studying, if a student is wise, must be done. In the evening it is pleasant to sit before a bright fire with her friends and talk over the many things that cry out for discussion; she may have to learn her part for some college play soon to be acted; there are Glee Club songs to be practised; there is class business to be attended to; and always there is the work for the next day's classes to be prepared. Four hundred and ninety-nine girls out of five hundred finally fall asleep at night without having had the time or the inclination for wistful comparisons of themselves with their companions.

The pleasure of even the dullest student in the independent

use of her mind, when she attains to it, is quite touching in its intensity, and is in its essence pure. I have myself seen more than one young girl's face made radiant by the realisation, for instance, that she could form her own opinions of poetry and had learned, on however modest a scale, to judge of it and appreciate it for herself. And I know a Bryn Mawr student for whom the world of nature was made infinitely beautiful and mysterious by her study of the myriad forms of life that inhabit a single pool. To gaze at the great stars of Orion's sword and belt flaming low in the east over twilight fields, and to appreciate on what countless individuals, through what uncounted ages, they have shed their light, is for a moment's imagination to be freed from the limits of time and space and individuality. One goes back to the narrow circumstances of one's daily life greatly the happier because of such experiences as these. For every human being the way of escape from the tyranny of circumstance is spiritual and intellectual—*internum aeternum*, as St. Augustine's famous phrase briefly puts it. Women's lives are, it is generally conceded, more restricted than men's, far narrower and more monotonous, and it would therefore seem that no more benevolent use of talent or of money could be made than the use of them to open to women the way to escape through the mind and the imagination.

Bryn Mawr does not permit her undergraduate students to specialise beyond a certain point. All alike must devote one third of one year's work to studying some science, another third of a year's work to another science, or to a course in political economy, history, law or mathematics, another third to the history of philosophy, another third to the fourth language omitted at entrance, and another third for two years to the study of English literature and of the correct writing and the correct pronunciation of the English language. In the two years that remain to her of the four years' course she may study exclusively any two allied subjects, though she may also diversify her work in certain prescribed ways; but even should she take full advantage of the permission to specialise, she will still have received a broad general foundation for her special learning. And, on the other hand, be her instincts never so Catholic, she is forced to devote herself for a whole year and a third to her "major subjects," for instance, chemistry and



physics, Greek and Latin, political economy and history and the like, and so is prevented from being too superficial.

Perhaps the most distinctively characteristic point shown by the above summary of requirements is the stress laid by them on English. One-sixth of a student's whole time as an undergraduate must, it has been seen, be devoted to a study of English literature and to the improvement of her power of expressing herself in English. She must study not only the construction of sentences and paragraphs and the meaning of words, she must also learn the proper enunciation of vowels and consonants and the proper accentuation of syllables in so far as they can be taught in a short time. Her attention is called to the provincialisms and inaccuracies of her individual pronunciation, and exercises are given to help her to correct her faults. The mere serious comparison of her way of speaking with that of her companions and of her teacher, an Englishman highly trained in the art of enunciation and the management of the voice, be she never so careless and indifferent, calls her attention at once to the varying beauty and harshness of various tones of voice and various enunciations. When mimicked by her teacher, her way of vocalising a given sentence leaves her no possibility of self-delusion. She may make jokes about the matter, and often in fact does, she may practise trilling her R's, for instance, so persistently and so loudly as to be a nuisance to all her neighbours, until a skit in the college paper celebrates her wilful zeal to her great delight, but she can never again be wholly careless of her speech. She will be aware that her accent is provincial, and in very many cases she will endeavour to make it less provincial and will do her part to uphold a standard of good usage.

The greatest trial of the average Bryn Mawr student in her whole college course is perhaps her French and German senior oral examination, and the jokes she makes about it, unlike those about her speech, are too serious really to amuse her. The fair degree of fluency in reading French and German upon which the college insists before giving the degree of A.B. to its students is tested by a committee of the faculty before which the seniors are brought up one by one to translate a few passages in each language at sight. In a little quiet room, awfully quiet, sit around a long table a member of the French or German department and another

member of the faculty with the president of the college presiding. Opposite Miss Thomas is a vacant chair and in that the student must take her seat. Of her French, perhaps, she is sure, but in spite of all the stories of Paul Heyse and the plays of Hauptmann she has been hurriedly reading, her German is still very shaky, as she would say, and she feels keenly the ignominy of stumbling through sentences that are perfectly intelligible to the three grave, attentive persons about her. From the time she is a freshman the wise student does a little reading in French and German in preparation for this inevitable moment, and she sometimes even manages to use it as an excuse for persuading her family to spend a summer in France or Germany with her, which, if not quite necessary, is distinctly pleasant. And all her life she will feel the benefit of the ability thus acquired to read easily two modern languages beside her own.

Together with the effort to prevent young students from specialising unduly, mentioned in a previous paragraph, there is also a strong effort made at Bryn Mawr to encourage a desire on their part to continue their work along definite lines and to become scholars and producers. In this the college is greatly helped by its graduate department. Its graduate students usually number from 60 to 70, of whom about ten per cent come up from the undergraduate department. The fellowships and scholarships, ranging from \$525 to \$200 in value, are open to graduates of all colleges of good standing, and the pecuniary assistance they give enables every year thirty young women to pursue graduate work in history, philosophy, classics, archæology, science and oriental and modern languages. Moreover, every year Bryn Mawr sends abroad to English and continental universities, by means of her European fellowships, the member of the graduating class who has received the highest average on her college course, the most able graduate student of one year's standing at the college, the most able student of two years' standing, making three in all. Many of these European fellows return to Bryn Mawr after their year abroad to complete their training and to receive the degree of doctor of philosophy.

This body of older and more serious women living with them exerts a strong influence on the undergraduates, and many a young

*"The stately grace of the Library."*





student has felt the inspiration of the friendship with a graduate she has thus had the opportunity to form. Fellows frequently come to Bryn Mawr from foreign countries, from England and Canada in especial, and from all the colleges in the United States to which women are admitted, and their presence makes against an excess of local pride. One year, for instance, three English girls came together from Cambridge, and being possessed of a truly British frankness of speech and having the support of their numbers and personal attractiveness, they soon made the community aware of its deficiencies. There was nothing they did not object to from the college pronunciation of Latin to the use of silver knives instead of steel, and the scarcity of "puddings with eggs." The returned European fellow enlivens many an afternoon walk with accounts of the methods and manners of foreign universities. She tells how Professor Sievers in Leipsic kindly promised to "overlook her presence" at his lectures—but that was some ten years ago; or more recently of how Professor von Wölflin, of Munich University, escorted her on his arm to the first Greek lecture of the term and gave her a seat of perfect security on the platform at a little desk by the side of his own desk; she explains that she had to take a young and very pretty sister with her as chaperon to a class in Oxford, of which she was the only woman member, and she describes the great kindness of the Master of Balliol, Dr. Caird, to her and a fellow student in asking them to do special work with him in his own study. She fires the imagination of her companions by tales of excavations in Greece or of researches among the MSS. of the Record Office at Somerset House, as the case may be. But always her influence makes for broadness and modesty. She has learned, more surely perhaps than she ever could by staying at one institution, how small a thing in the world of scholarship her own attainments are, and her comrades clearly perceive how much she in her turn is their superior. And the resolutions they mutually form to devote themselves seriously to work in philology, to problems of education and government, to writing poetry or plays or novels, to scientific investigation and the like, have already borne good fruit.

After they leave the college about one-third of the graduates of Bryn Mawr engage in paying occupations, for the most part in

the occupation of teaching, though there are among them lawyers, doctors, editors, librarians, secretaries, and college settlement workers. The remainder continue their studies and return home to live with their families. They scatter into nearly every state in the Union and find their way east and west across the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, settling in Japan, in China, in the Hawaiian Islands, in Russia, in Denmark, in France and in England. But, however different the futures that await them, whether they are to be court ladies in the Orient or doctors in Iowa, they carry everywhere with them the memories, the knowledge, and the spiritual ambitions given them in their youth.

There is, however, more at stake here than the personal fate of a few individuals, great as is the appeal that makes to the imagination. In a country like ours, which is as yet to a large extent democratic and fluid, the dismissal of her children by an educational institution has a quite peculiar importance. The great majority of them will remain in the United States, where they are not forced by class distinctions and by absence of opportunities to fit themselves into the niches occupied by the older generation, as in more rigidly organised countries the younger generation too often must do. Obviously they will use the instruments that have been put into their hands with an effectiveness at once inspiring and terrifying to contemplate. In the comparative absence of traditional checks, and assisted by the great number of opportunities open and by our national love of quick changes (love of progress we call it), they will everywhere with surprising rapidity begin to set standards, social, intellectual and moral. They will open schools and teach in colleges and be looked up to by simple communities as exponents of culture.

This state of things imposes on our educational institutions a heavy burden of responsibility, which they can adequately meet only by maintaining the greatest singleness of purpose and by never lowering their ideals to satisfy a popular desire for quick and easy education. In the twenty years since its opening the number of students at Bryn Mawr has necessarily greatly increased and there are at the present moment 437 students within its walls, but it is the avowed intention of those who direct its policy that the college shall remain small. By upholding a standard of schol-

arship and of culture that is difficult and not easy to attain, she will inevitably lose many students, but she will not regret the loss. Bryn Mawr has faith to believe that as long as her grey towers stand there will never be wanting youthful enthusiasm and youthful love of learning to inhabit them. Future generations will turn to her for inspiration. Be it her part never to betray her trust.

HELEN THOMAS FLEXNER, 1893.

November, 1905.



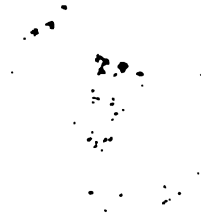


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